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ABSTRACT

The focus-group interview format was used to investigate the implementation of the Career Ladders teacher-incentive program in a rural school district in Arizona. Two interviews were planned for each of the following groups: (1) school board members; (2) Career Ladders steering committee; (3) administrators; (4) central office staff; (5) parents; (6) Career Ladder teachers; and (7) non-Career Ladder teachers. Despite the diversity of the seven focus groups, their comments yielded some common themes about the Career Ladder program. The most dominant was a perceived overall lack of district readiness to adopt a program of the scope and magnitude of the Career Ladder program and a lack of needed organization. Related to this finding was the expressed need for an agreed-on curriculum. A separate focus group for the Career Ladders Pilot District Network served as a check on the internal validity of the conceptual structure being piloted in the district, and it defined concerns about program implementation. This group was far more positive in its evaluation of the developing Career Ladders program than were the school district focus groups. Follow-up interviews were conducted with five of the seven focus groups (parents and central staff could not be rescheduled). The focus group format is a powerful tool for validation of the theoretical model for program development by giving all groups a chance to express themselves. (SLD)

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CASE STUDY RESEARCH:

A MODEL FOR SINGLE-SETTING, EMBEDDED, FOCUS-GROUP INTERVIEW DESIGN & ANALYSIS PROCEDURES

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ASSESSMENT AND EVALUATION OF AN EDUCATIONAL REFORM PROGRAM IN A RURAL ARIZONA SCHOOL DISTRICT

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INTRODUCTION

Overview

The evaluation of a complex educational reform program such as Career Ladders requires a data base which thoroughly captures all possible aspects of the implementation process. Such programs typically produce multi-faceted, and sometimes unpredictable, effects upon existing school structures and key personnel. As a result, restricting the analysis to only those outcomes which are readily identifiable and quantifiable (e.g., standardized test scores of students) might yield an incomplete picture of the program's true magnitude of effects.

Perhaps the ultimate indicators of the status of a change process are the attitudes, perceptions and feelings of the people who are affected by it on a day-to-day basis. Organizational theory has long since demonstrated that the most well-intentioned change effort can fail miserably if adequate understanding and support of its participants are not taken into account. Therefore, an accurate monitoring of such behavioral variables is absolutely essential to a valid evaluation process.

The major limitation of more traditional approaches to measuring behavioral outcomes has been a possible "error of omission." Subjects' responses have often been restricted to those particular items (often a Likert-type attitudinal written survey scale) presented to them by the researcher. However, no outside evaluator, whether well-intentioned or thorough with respect to pretesting, could ever comprehend the "true inner workings" of a program quite like the subjects themselves. By allowing these participants to "tell the story in their own words," the evaluator could gain access to potential program outcomes and effects which he/she might not have thought to measure otherwise.

A research technique known as "focus-group interviewing" is a well-established procedure for collecting such potentially valuable data. Originally developed in the areas of consumer behavior and marketing research, it has more recently been successfully extended to evaluation research in other fields (Higginbotham and James, 1979; Kruger, 1988). In focus-group research, a relatively homogeneous group of between four and twelve participants is asked a series of carefully sequenced, open-ended questions (known as a "questioning route") designed to elicit their attitudes, perceptions and feelings concerning a product, service or process. The latitude of response option and possibility for response alteration as a

result of interaction with one's fellow interviewees is the primary advantage of focus-group data over more traditional numerical measures. As a result, the research may acquire a more thorough, complete and accurate picture of the way in which the product, service or process is actually being perceived by affected individuals.

The present study utilized the focus-group interview format in order to investigate the existence, interrelationship, perceived strengths and indicators of insufficiency within the support and focus factors of the developmental process effecting educational change and reform. Such case-study research is known as "explanatory," since its primary purpose is to validate a theoretical model in an actual applied context (Yin, 1984). That is, by probing subjects' perceptions of the components of this model, one can determine if the hypothesized elements do indeed exist and operate in practice as assumed.

The implementation of the Career Ladders teacher-incentive program in a rural Arizona career ladders school district was the primary focus of the validation of this hypothesized developmental model. Specifically, according to the schematic proposed by Yin, this constituted a "single-setting, embedded" (several distinct strata of respondents, interviewed separately) case study. Questioning routes were developed to elicit subjects' perceptions of the support and focus factors of this model, as it applied to their particular experiences with the Career Ladders program. Additional details of the design methodology are given in the following section.

Focus-Group Interviewing Procedure

A total of two interviews was planned for each of the following groups of this rural Arizona career ladders school district's subjects: school-board members; Career Ladders steering committee; administrators (principals and assistant principals); central-office staff; parents; Career Ladder teachers; and non-Career Ladder teachers. As is customary in focus-group interviewing, each of the foregoing groups was interviewed separately. Each interview session lasted between one and one-and-a half hours.

During the first session, the model of support and focus factors was distributed to all participants, in order to presensitize them to the proposed theoretical structure of the Career Ladders model. This procedure was followed in accordance with the explanation-building proposed in the research design of this particular

focus group. The individual questioning routes elicited respondents' perceptions of the existence, interrelationships, strengths, and weaknesses of each of the components of this model.

A separate focus-group session was conducted with the members of the Career Ladders Pilot District Network (CLPDN) between the first and second series of focus groups held in the rural Arizona career ladders school district. The CLPDN interview was conducted in order to establish the internal validity of the series of questioning routes being utilized in this rural Arizona career ladders school district. In other words, the questions were in effect being pilot-tested for their clarity, thoroughness, and relevance to the theoretical model.

The second round of focus-group interviewing in this rural school district included all but two of the aforementioned groups: the central-office staff and the parents could not be scheduled. However, in order to correct for this unplanned contingency, the researchers decided to conduct a separate, "open-group" session, where participants unable to come to any of the previous sessions could have an opportunity to express their views. The questioning routes for the second round of sessions were carefully developed to probe repeatedly expressed and/or emotionally charged areas of interest which were evident from the tapes and transcripts of the first set of sessions. However, as is customary in such settings, the moderator departed from the established route(s) as needed, in order to pursue topics of discussion which sparked special interest in more depth.

Several common themes emerged from both sets of focus-group interviews, as well as from the CLPDN validation session. All three sets of interviews will be discussed in more detail in the sections that follow. Results will be summarized per group in each set. Summary comments will identify preliminary conclusions and recommendations implied by the three sets of results.

Results of the Rural Arizona Career Ladders School District Focus-Group Interviews: First Series

Each of the above group meetings will be summarized in the order presented above. They will be organized around broad topic areas related to the model of support and focus factors.

Focus-Group Interview with School-Board Members

This session concentrated primarily on the areas of student achievement, lack of curriculum, program designs and structures, and organizational climate deficiencies. Several comments were also made concerning administrative support and the role of the steering committee in program implementation.

Considerable discussion revolved around the necessity to link program goals to the assessment and improvement of student achievement. It was noted that proper long-range planning and identification of commonly-agreed-upon goals were needed, yet sorely lacking, due to the lack of curriculum in the district. Furthermore, development of such a district-wide curriculum must meet the unique needs of the school district, rather than being based upon national norms and standardized materials. Such long-range joint curriculum planning would correct the current year-to-year operations, according to one participant, ". . . so [that] the program doesn't go around in circles."

Optimism was expressed concerning the district's ability to implement a long-range planning process and to refocus the CL program on student-achievement and teacher-effectiveness objectives. ". . . we just need to iron out a few of these wrinkles [in order to incorporate student-achievement assessment] . . . [the program] must get down to bare bones [& we must] try to make it work . . .."

Along these lines, subjects noted that the evaluation system must be realigned to assess effectiveness more clearly. One person expressed the concern that the legislature will require good evaluation instruments as a condition for program continuation.

One vividly mentioned objective in developing a teacher-effectiveness program focused on student achievement was the need to overcome negative publicity concerning students' performance in the district. One respondent mentioned a recent newspaper article in the Arizona Republic which labeled this school district's students as having standardized test scores below the national average levels. The resultant harmful effects upon students' and teachers' self-esteem of such publicity were then discussed. This subject stated, "Let's make liars of the news media and bring up our scores." The desirability of an agreed-upon curriculum, as well as a properly functioning teacher-effectiveness program, was seen as instrumental in attaining this goal.

In terms of CL program designs and structures, a number of existing problems were identified by school-board interviewees. For one thing, it was noted that some CL teachers were working on 'trivial and meaningless' projects in order to accumulate credit for program participation. This person suggested that perhaps projects should be more carefully audited by some outside party in order to establish their relevance to students' learning.

A second detriment to classroom performance was the excessive amount of paperwork required of CL teachers. The observation was made that some of these teachers were doing this paperwork during class time, while assigning students busy-work in the interim.

The training and peer-evaluation requirements of CL were a third hindrance to teacher performance of classroom obligations. Such programs were identified as resulting in teachers being removed from the classroom for large amounts of time. One person noted that this seriously impaired the necessary one-to-one interaction which teachers should have with their students.

Regarding CL program requirements, the rules themselves were cited as too confusing. One board member noted the need to phrase these requirements "in layman's terms." Furthermore, another respondent took exception to the progressive nature of the "ladder" itself. He observed, "Everyone's stuck at the middle of the ladder . . . pushing to get on top."

A repeated focus of discussion was the motivation of program participants. References were made to "deal-making," "fast-tracking," and the need for teachers to concentrate on students' needs, as opposed to "get-rich-quick" motivation.

A number of interpersonal problems were identified and discussed at this point. CL was thought of as "labeling" a person, with such overt separation as CL and non-CL teachers sitting apart at meetings. Along these lines, the existence of considerable lack of team-building, jealousy and dissension were noted. One particular source of this jealousy, as explained by one subject, was the incidence of spouses both on CL and earning $ 40,000.00 apiece.

School-board members briefly noted the need for administrative support in order for the program to be properly functional. Principals and assistant principals need to communicate more with participants, as

well as with the steering committee. Regarding the steering committee itself, subjects expressed a need for positive publicity so that the program and its accomplishments will ". . . really sparkle."

The session concluded with an expressed need for community support, especially with regard to refocusing the goals of the program. One person stated, "Somewhere along the line it drifted from its original concept and is now thrown around like a hot potato."

Focus-Group Interview with Steering-Committee Members

Considerable time was spent discussing the issue of administrative leadership with this group, as well as the coordinator's interaction with administrators. Teacher effectiveness, leadership and focus on student achievement also generated interest. Some disagreement and opinion divisiveness was apparent within the steering committee on these issues.

One area of such divisiveness was the question concerning the need for a district-wide curriculum. This was identified as a current issue of deliberation and discussion in recent steering-committee meetings. There were clearly mixed feelings in ". . . being told what to do . . ." if a district-wide curriculum were developed and mandated. One person also referred to the "threatening" manner in which goals were currently being communicated, with obvious concern that a district-wide curriculum might be imposed from above in the same dysfunctional manner.

On the other hand, it was pointed out that such a long-range and agreed-upon plan would help eliminate the problem of teachers setting so-called 'trivial' objectives. Another steering-committee member pointed out beneficial side effects such as consensus and team-building, which would result from development of a commonly-agreed-upon curriculum. This subject illustrated the point with an actual example of current evaluation procedures, whereby each teacher developed five objectives to be met jointly with his/her building principal.

With regard to student achievement, the idea of documentation and accountability of teacher activities was agreed-upon in principle. One person liked the notion of identifying ". . . what works and what doesn't."

Administrative leadership in general was characterized as dictatorial. The superintendent was identified by one steering-committee member as saying [about the CL program]: "It'll go, no matter what." In particular, central administration was perceived as creating bottlenecks with respect to coordinator attempts to implement committe decisions. (One subject colorfully characterized the massive bureaucracy involved in getting committee decisions implemented as dealing with ". . . a cast of thousands.") Steering-committee members specifically identified signs of administrative indifference and hostility to the program. These included such warning signals as: repeatedly placing CL concerns last on meeting agendas; delaying paperwork on steering-committee decisions delivered to them by the coordinator; and displaying signs of disinterest by their conduct and body language in all interactions with the coordinator. One participant stated that ". . . you must see a meeting in action . . .," presumably to convey the frustration and ineffectiveness perceived on the part of the steering committee.

Jealousy was mentioned as one possible cause of the problems experienced with administrators. One individual felt that administrators might feel threatened, since some CL teachers' salaries now exceed those of assistant principals.

However, comments were divided somewhat on an overall, long-term assessment of administrators' involvement in the CL program. In one member's opinion, central administration is definitely more tuned in, receptive and understanding of program goals this year.

There was also clear disagreement of the role of the program in promoting teacher effectiveness and leadership. On the one hand, according to one respondent, it is difficult to know if teachers would not have been effective even without the program. However, a second committee member described the functioning of the CL program in his academic department as providing models for optimal teacher effectiveness; that is, "selling success," or serving as an "umbrella" which could protect and nurture experiments with new methods and approaches.

Even more debate ensued with respect to the topic of peer evaluators. One subject praised the candor, thoroughness and value of peer evaluation, as opposed to more traditional feedback received from administrators. "They [peer evaluators] don't seem to mind telling you [what principals won't]." As a consequence, the "nudge" received from the peer feedback was more useful in improving teaching methods.

However, this view was not universally shared within the steering committee. A second member pointed out the negative effects of teacher self-esteem which sometimes resulted from such peer candor. According to this respondent, this peer feedback sometimes resulted in hurt feelings, a poorer self-image ('I thought I was a good teacher before hearing this') and even a disenchantment with the entire teaching profession.

The topic of organizational climate generated interest and illustrations of primarily negative factors. Participants mentioned lack of trust; jealousies; lack of feedback and disregard of ideas proposed; violation of confidentiality; and an overall climate of negativity. There was also a shared perception that some of the teachers placed at the highest (III, IV) levels were not sufficiently competent, which served only to fuel further resentment. One individual characterized this as "... go[ing] along with the fiction that all teachers are equally the best." On the positive side, the CL program was credited with the important intrinsic result of promoting "competence motivation." It was also acknowledged that the CL program was in fact being blamed for other, pre-existing organizational-climate problems. There was clear disagreement on the topic of whether problems would be solved by scrapping the CL program.

Several consistent comments and suggestions emerged with respect to program designs and structures. Foremost among these was the need to integrate program components which had been operating in a fragmented and isolated manner. The need for long-term planning prior to haphazard implementation was also expressed.

Focus-Group Interview with Principals and Assistant Principals

The primary topics of discussion with administrators were the areas of student achievement, evaluation, and leadership. The area of organizational climate, as well as administrators' involvement in the program generally, sparked particular interest.

Principals and assistant principals expressed concern with the apparent lack of program focus on student outcomes. (An initial response to the question, "Do you measure what's expected?" was derisive laughter and the reply, "Is this a trick question?!") In the subjects' view, the CL program has not yet resulted in improved teaching and learning. Currently stated student objectives were criticized for two

reasons: being trivial in some cases (an example was given of a teacher wishing to ". . . track daily attendance and link it to student achievement") and not incorporating such essential indicators of student growth as affective, social and emotional factors. As one respondent observed, "Students with social and emotional problems need to be dealt with before they can achieve well." This situation was attributed to the lack of an overall curriculum; that is, teachers were being forced to generate objectives in isolation.

The CL program structure was faulted for not being properly focused on teacher effectiveness and student progress. The entire group enthusiastically and wholeheartedly agreed with the opinion of one administrator that the program needed to return to this basic purpose, as opposed to merely ". . . going through certain steps." Furthermore, the best possible outcome of the program ought to be ". . . knowing [that] one is a better teacher . . .," as opposed to churning out ". . . canned lessons . . ." mechanically in order to satisfy the program requirements.

There was expressed disagreement with respect to the CL program's role in developing effective teacher-leaders. For one thing, according to one administrator, there was no visible difference in the performance of CL and non-CL teachers. Another person felt that ". . . the same persons would be pursuing leadership regardless [of the CL program]." A third person faulted the CL program for its too-narrow focus: that is, only on tangible classroom acitivites, with no provision for evaluating the more global and general professional attributes of its participants. A summary comment was made along these lines concerning a perception of ". . . teacher leadership without direction."

Considerable interest and discussion centered around administrators' participation in the CL program. There was a strongly expressed and shared perception that principals had been effectively excluded from playing an active role. One person characterized the exclusion as ". . . foggy activity going on in the central office . . ." which was not shared with principals. With respect to program inception, administrators were not involved in the initial design and implementation. The program was characterized as being ". . . modeled [after] some programs down in the Valley and [developed by] the steering committee." To this day, according to participants, there was no information sharing or satisfactory involvement with the steering committee. One person expressed a desire to play a more active role; yet, ". . . no one's asked us!"

This perceived lack of input and ownership was paralleled by frustration with the CL evaluation process. One subject resented the need to spend eight to ten hours filling out the evaluations while at the same time having no say in the CL placement process. As a consequence, some principals and assistant principals have resigned themselves to their lack of buy-in and have turned their efforts to more rewarding and satisfying activities. As summed up by one participant ". . . from the principals' viewpoint, other things are more important."

Program designs and structures came under fire for inequities in placement, as well as excessive required paperwork. With regard to the former, there was spirited discussion about the fact that too many people were starting out at top levels, some of whom were not qualified. This placement resulted in unfair work loads for some teachers, as well as a lack of motivation to improve (as, with initial top placement, there was literally no place to advance). Another administrator related the example of a teacher in tears and feeling overwhelmed due to the burden of necessary paperwork and the consequent time taken away from other teaching duties. In addition, some requirements of program participation were criticized as being trivial in certain cases. One subject commented that participating teachers now want credit for everything that they do, such as helping out at school dances. The deficiencies in program design and implementation were summed up by one administrator as ". . . rewards for those who write well and write quickly."

Discussion of organizational climate sparked perceptible interest and emotion of participants. The announcement of the focus-group meeting itself, in fact, was described as coming from a memo which left people with the suspicion that the meeting itself was contrived. The negativity generated by idle complainers was also pointed out, with one person stating, ". . . some won't be happy with whatever transpires." Finally, one individual noted a distinct complacency on the part of CL teachers, who allegedly refuse to volunteer for activities which non-CL's agree to handle.

The final area discussed with administrators dealt with their perceptions of the role and effectiveness of the school board. The board was praised for its recognition of the aforementioned morale and organizational-climate problems. On the other hand, one person felt that the board's support of the goals of the CL program would only last as long as the available funding. Another characterized the board as being

". . . as much in the dark as we." One subject expressed the opinion that the board needs to be composed primarily of teachers in order to be optimally effective.

Focus-Group Interview with Central-Office Staff

Discussion with this group centered primarily on the issues of program design and implementation. Recommendations emerged with respect to the overall planning process and the necessary focus on student achievement outcomes.

A repeated criticism of CL program design was the observed tendency of its elements to operate in isolation. One subject pointed to the coordinator's office and likened the current situation to Federal programs hastily instituted and subsequently generating a whole separate and cumbersome bureaucracy of their own. A second group member presented this colorful analogy: "[It's like] trying to build an engine to ride uphill, but we don't have all [of] the parts . . . so [that] we end up pushing it uphill."

An integral reason for this problem, according to central-office input, was the lack of careful planning and direction prior to program implementation. One person observed, ". . . [we] can't just introduce a program and let it loose." A lack of staff input and involvement in the planning phases was pointed out. The school district was also characterized at not being at a sufficient readiness level; as a result, much planning and direction had to be done ex-post. One individual held up the support and focus model (which had been distributed prior to the interview session) and commented that an actual program needed to be tailored carefully to the unique needs of this rural school district, as opposed to serving the needs of, say, Phoenix and Tucson.

The current program design was also criticized on several other grounds. One person observed that the CL program appears to reward longevity, as opposed to student outcomes. Two others noted, "We've overquantified things and imposed paperwork unrelated to student achievement;" and, "The quality of the program has been lessened in favor of quantity."

Along these lines, subjects identified a lack of agreement on common curriculum and goals as contributing to evaluation problems. There seemed to be confusion on the part of all participants as to what "effective student outcomes" ought to be in the first place. One central-office member commented that

they had already tried four or five evaluation systems and are still unable to relate specific behaviors to desired student outcomes fairly and consistently. There was consensus with the observation that specific teacher competencies need to be identified, specified and linked with student progress in order to implement an effective evaluation system.

In terms of leadership, one person stated that the teacher-to-principal ratio in their school district is twice the national average. This situation made it especially cumbersome for principals to handle an extra 30% of evaluations and paperwork associated with CL requirements, according to this subject.

Discussion of organizational climate was comparatively minimal for the central-office group. However, several problems were briefly cited, among them a lack of effective communication and distrust. One participant noted, "Every little move is a conflict."

The group concluded by proposing several recommended solutions to the aforementioned problems. Primary among these was a vision, or focus, with the emphasis on student achievement. Administrators also needed to play a more active role in the program. Finally, it was felt that money should be de-emphasized as an incentive in the reward system.

Focus-Group Interview with Parents

This group proved to be lively, well-motivated to share ideas and concerns, and sincerely interested in their children's academic progress. They generated a list of practical suggestions to increase parental involvement in the educational system.

One parent pointed out that the school district already has tremendous potential in the form of untapped resources that could be used to enrich the academic experiences of its children. A reference was also made to the school system in Asia, where there is continuous interaction between teachers and parents.

Along with this topic, parents eagerly shared their frustrations with respect to the boredom and apathy which they sense on the part of students. One participant recalled the school spirit which was formerly in evidence when she herself was a student. Another parent mentioned a special program designed to teach young children to play the cello which he recently observed in Phoenix. He described the joy and eagerness with which these students learned and wondered why similar programs could not be tried in the

school district, as now ". . . the only big thing here is athletics . . .." This issue of wanting to re-motivate students was reiterated several times in the discussion, with much genuine concern obvious on the part of the parents.

Related to the general disinterest of students were the more serious problems of discipline, tardiness and absences. One subject commented that there exists on paper a tribal law to the effect that parents should be notified in the case of an unexcused absence; yet, it is not enforced. This individual prominently referred to the need to restore parental accountability, in the form of assuming responsibility for the child's regular attendance at school. Another person, agreeing with the lax and inconsistent enforcement of school rules, commented that ". . . the district is caught in the middle . . ." between indifferent students and parents.

The following ideas were eagerly put forth as possible solutions to increase parental involvement and motivate students:

1. parents and grandparents helping out in the classroom (with respect to the latter, mention was made of the "Granny Program");
2. latchkey programs for middle and upper grades;
3. older students setting up mock businesses (akin to "Junior Achievement");
4. utilizing students themselves in the teaching process, to tutor their peers;
5. classroom projects designed to introduce students to different career opportunities (one such program, requiring the students to interview and report on persons holding different occupations within the community, was described and praised by one of the parents);
6. increased computer-skills emphasis (one such program currently being conducted in Leupp was mentioned as an example); and
7. more information dissemination to parents themselves, such as the need to prepare a handbook so that parents would be more aware of school rules and policies.

The CL program itself was a topic more of curiosity than specific criticism, alluding perhaps to its hasty and fragmented implementation which was also discussed in other groups. Parents asked the moderator to describe its purpose and operation and were sincerely interested in the responses. At this

point, one participant commented, "We need more information on Career Ladders . . . why haven't teachers gone for this? I see it as a way of getting really motivated teachers, as opposed to those who just go for the paycheck."

The isolated operation of the program was noted during the discussion as well. One person asked, "Why did the steering committee develop as an isolated bureaucratic structure?" Another observed, "It wastes everyone's time when programs operate in isolation."

In addition, the overall lack of long-range planning and direction prior to implementation of the CL program in this school district was mentioned. With regard to the current perceived status of the program, one parent summed up the situation by characterizing it as ". . . a complacent system which has grown roots . . .." One possible remedy proposed was the idea of a year-round program, with comparison made to a similarly operating school district in Albuquerque. (The moderator observed that such a year-round working obligation is similar to the way in which jobs are structured in the business world.)

The parent group reacted very positively to the moderator's feedback that ". . . you're not alone in having [these] problems. School organizations are structured bureaucracies. You've recognized it and done something about it . . . [you] took a risk, since the program has exposed problems . . .." The discussion concluded on an optimistic and positively reinforcing note, with the moderator telling the participants that ". . . there ARE ways to get the excitement back!"

Focus-Group Interview with Career Ladder Teachers

The overall tone of this discussion was emotionally charged at several points. In particular, the evaluation system and the present organizational climate engendered a lively interchange.

There were several distinctly positive responses to the area of student achievement, which was raised early on in the discussion. It was agreed that the goal of the CL program had been presented to the teachers as retaining and rewarding those teachers who work toward student progress. One teacher also noted that teachers are now being held accountable for student learning. In addition, it was stated that one or two social/emotional/behavioral objectives are being built into the goals set by and for teachers in certain

settings. A third person stated that the percentage of mastery on the ITBS and criterion-referenced tests has increased each year and is now up to 75%.

Focusing more specifically on teacher accountability, all of the participants agreed that teacher skills have improved measurably. For instance, there is now a greater focus on areas like analysis, synthesis and closure in the preparation of lesson plans. Another person observed that new ideas are being openly discussed and shared, among both CL and non-CL teachers.

The overall positive tone of the comments began to shift, however, with the introduction of the topic of the evaluation system. One individual did praise the intent: "This is the only program where someone asks, 'how did it [lesson] turn out?'" Other related comments were, ". . . someone finally noticed." and "You now know what they're looking for . . ." (with reference to a detailed instrument containing 31 specific areas to be rated on a five-point scale). Another teacher singled out the peer-evaluation training as being especially relevant. This person noted that one's basic skill level, self-awareness and organizational skills are enhanced as a direct result of this training program: ". . . [you] don't get stale."

On the other hand, the cumbersome nature of the requisite paperwork came in for some heavy criticism from the CL teachers. The instrument was described as being much too lengthy, in particular the necessity of writing in a "rationale" for each area being evaluated. Another teacher noted the last-minute nature of the development of the evaluation forms, observing that it seemed as though someone had just thrown it together at the eleventh hour. Finally, the need for separate evaluation systems for "special personnel" was cited.

Some divisiveness was apparent within the group when the topic of administrative leadership was raised. One source of frustration was a consistent lack of communication and feedback from central administration in response to their teachers' ideas, questions and problems. This situation was compounded by tremendous uncertainty as to the actual chain of command and decision process; one teacher characterized administration as simply being ". . . up there somewhere." With regard to administrative support for the CL program generally, one teacher described it as ". . . at best, it's more of a tolerance."

However, there was majority agreement to the premise that principals need more of a buy-in into the CL program in order to function effectively as leaders within its structure. The teachers returned to this point, in fact, during the total discussion. A suggestion was also made that principals receive explicit training to improve their accountability.

The next area of discussion with CL teachers was the lack of curriculum. Respondents readily noted the lack of direction; it was characterized variously as " . . . doing our own thing . . ." and ". . . [the] rules change after the game starts . . .. " One person recognized the need for standards, or benchmarks, in order to have an effectively functioning evaluation system, as discussed earlier.

Teacher input and communication were seen as particularly lacking. With regard to the former, one teacher stated that, "We just saw [decision] in finished form and we'd say, 'this is what we decided on!'" Another noted that the teachers still don't have a 1989 calendar; this person recognized a critical need for feedback concerning long-term planning and goal-setting. Communication, when received, was likely to be garbled at best: ". . . versions of stories change." Along these lines, the planning and execution of meetings came in for special criticism. For one thing, meetings were sometimes announced the same day that they were intended to be held, prompting one teacher to ask, "Are they discourteous? Disorganized? Incompetent?" Furthermore, the meetings themselves were perceived as repetitive: "[they consist of] the same people asking the same questions."

A number of distinct problems were identified as part of the overall organizational climate. One person commented on the stress of unrealistic deadlines, in particular when the teachers were told just eight weeks ago to come up with a curriculum by May. An incident was described concerning stolen mail, pointing up the issues of distrust and breach of confidentiality.

One area of organizational climate came in for special attention: the alleged existence of dissension between CL and non-CL teachers. There was a noticeable silence when the moderator initially asked whether this was, in fact, true. Then the teachers began to describe specific problem behaviors. Prominent among these was the charge that non-CL's were idle complainers. One person suggested that they were actually reacting emotionally to "two-year-old rules" which were presumably no longer in force. Another CL teacher characterized the climate of unsubstantiated rumors as "complaints but no solutions." A third

claimed that CL critics would actually like to see the money incentives divided equally, in annual increments. As a final irony in this area, one subject pointed out that the school with the most such critics actually also has the greatest number of applicants for the CL program.

Near the end of the discussion of this area, it was conceded that the climate between CL and non-CL teachers has perceptibly improved on a year-to-year basis. It was also noted that teachers in general are working on creating a more pleasant and positive environment.

The moderator asked the CL teachers to assess the effectiveness of the steering committee and the school board, respectively. With regard to the former, all of the teachers agreed that the steering committee was made up of extremely hard-working individuals. However, the teachers would like to get more feedback from the steering committee. Most participants had no opinion on the effectiveness of the school board, with one person explaining that the members are too new to gauge their performance at this point. At the same time, only one teacher believed that the board can be characterized as "open-minded" or "unbiased."

The topic of intrinsic motivators brought the tone of the discussion back to a positive note. One teacher acknowledged the recognition and professionalism inherent in the program, stating, "It's the first time somebody's ever looked" at teacher performance.

With respect to monetary incentives, one person liked the idea of a marketplace-like assessment of "worth" which was implied by the incentive schedule. However, another commented that there was some confusion and lack of information generally as to what the salary schedule was supposed to be.

The final theme discussed consisted of program designs and structures. There was clear agreement with the idea that there should be a choice with respect to participation in the CL program. Another person thought that the master's degree ought to be required for movement up the ladder, akin to professional licensure prerequisites in the business world. The discussion again turned positive towards the end of the session, with one teacher admitting that "Career Ladders has forced lots of good things."

Focus-Group Interview with Non-Career Ladder Teachers

This group, like its CL counterparts, was eager to share opinions relative to several aspects of the program. Two areas singled out for lively discussion were student achievement and organizational climate.

A number of serious allegations were made about teachers trying to manipulate the student-achievement reporting requirements of the CL program. Among other things, teachers were accused of "teaching to the test;" repeating lessons and/or testing until the desired percentage of "gain" is numerically reached; deliberately not teaching well during the first several weeks, so as to show a higher "gain" score overall; teachers being told by the superintendent to "show gains" regardless of their actual numeric results; and teachers actually altering the scores themselves. (With regard to the last allegation, one person said that the teacher had actually been overheard bragging about the illegal action in the teachers' lounge. Furthermore, this offense was reported to the school board, but nothing was ever done.) One proposed remedy to help prevent offenses such as overt coaching for tests was having teachers exchange classes.

Along these lines, one non-CL focus-group participant made repeated mention of a distinction between so-called quantitative "gains," computed between two test administrations, and the notion of a more repeated, systematic "monitoring," or "sampling" of student achievement. The latter should be the focus of the evaluation system, according to this teacher; yet it was seldom applied in practice. Instead, the process inevitably turned into a "dog-and-pony show, " according to this person, with performance directed solely to the (narrow) criteria. (Interestingly enough, teachers were identified as not being at fault for these abuses. Instead, "the system" itself was blamed.)

The problems in establishing clear evaluation criteria, and the frustration in adequately assessing student achievement, were linked to the lack of an overall curriculum. Respondents noted the lack of administrative involvement, stating that the persons who conduct the evaluation do not have a say in the placement process. There was some disagreement within the non-CL group, however, when the issue of peer evaluation was raised. Some participants felt positively about peer evaluators, with one person stating that peer evaluations were better than those conducted by principals. The training received by peer evaluators was perceived as being insufficient; one teacher pointed out that it consisted of only two sessions, with one session being held on a Saturday. Several teachers felt that peer evaluators gave scanty feedback at best; one teacher was told only that "you teach above-level" by a peer evaluator who was not even from the same academic area. Another teacher admitted that the only time she types her lesson plan is

for formal evalutions; in particular, she criticized the detail required. Finally, one teacher observed, "Assembly-line evaluation doesn't help student achievement."

The subjects briefly mentioned that they would like to see more administrative accountability. Communication from the top was characterized as insufficient, with one teacher asking "What were the results of the 'movement committee?'" Another pointed out that memos are circulated three or four times yearly, presumably to solicit teachers' input as to ideas and suggestions; yet, there is invariably no feedback on teacher comments submitted in response.

The tendency to place applicants at top levels immediately came in for heavy criticism here, as in other groups. One person noted that a Level III placement is perceived as a "stigma," when in fact one should feel proud to work one's way up from, say, Level I. CL applicants were identified as having the attitude, "If not at Level IV [at initial placement], why go for it?"

In addition, the group responded with laughter at one member's account of a recent applicant's "informational" experience. This applicant was allegedly told, "there's not as much paperwork now" required by the CL program. Another "familiar" area of dissatisfaction, as having surfaced in other focus-group discussions, dealt with CL teachers being pulled out of their own classrooms for inordinate amounts of time, in order to fulfill other program requirements.

The CL coordinator was perceived as untrustworthy and not objective. He was alleged to have said, "I'll keep the program at the expense of the kids and everything." In particular, the coordinator was criticized for inconsistent application of CL program rules and especially for seemingly arbitrary extension of deadlines. Respondents characterized interactions with him as being 'personality conflicts.'

The area of organizational climate, as stated at the outset, generated emotionally charged responses and particular interest. The biggest complaint leveled against CL teachers was their alleged reluctance to share ideas and to give detailed, meaningful feedback to their non-CL counterparts. The CL program itself was characterized as a "club," with overt ostracism and broken friendships as its consequence. The non-CL teachers resented their apparent labeling (by CL's) as 'just gripers.' In addition, they resented being made to feel guilty if they chose not to apply for the CL program. Respondents in turn characterized CL teachers as

being unprofessional, as well as "having sold out" for personal gain. They also believed that the overall organizational climate had deteriorated from cooperative to purely competitive.

Summary Comments: First Series of Focus-Group Interviews

Despite the diversity in background and interests of the seven focus groups, their comments yielded some common themes with regard to the CL program and its implementation. These will be briefly summarized below.

Perhaps the most dominant issue to emerge from the discussion was a perceived overall lack of district readiness to adopt a program of the scope and magnitude of CL. The lack of long-run planning and subsequent haphazard implementation was repeatedly noted in the focus-group sessions.

Related to this is the frequently expressed need for an agreed-upon curriculum. Commonly shared goals would benefit both the desired program focus upon student-achievement outcomes (also discussed directly below), as well as the establishment of clearly stated benchmarks to expedite and improve the evaluation process.

In terms of program designs and structures, all of the participants seemed to agree in principle with re-establishing teacher effectiveness and accountability for student achievement as the primary focus. However, the actual structure of the program is perceived as being paperwork-oriented; unwieldy; poorly communicated; inequitable (in quick initial placements at Levels III and IV, leaving applicants with no place to progess, as well as engendering problems in self-image for those who happen to be placed at lower levels at first); rewarding teachers for relatively trivial and meaningless activities; and resulting in teachers being out of their own classrooms for inordinate amounts of time -- thereby ironically jeopardizing the "teacher accountability" which is supposed to be the mission of the program in the first place.

Administrative leadership is seen as sorely lacking, in part justifiable due to principals' lack of buy-in into the CL program. They are burdened with excessive paperwork, while at the same time being denied key decision-making responsibilities such as participating in the placement process.

The organizational climate was primarily described in negative terms during the entire series of first focus-group sessions. Problems such as mistrust, jealousy and divisiveness (CL vs. non-CL teachers) were

repeatedly cited. On the other hand, there was not a clear agreement that the CL program was, in fact, the cause of these problems. Indirect evidence for this conclusion is provided by numerous allegations of "idle complainers" who are unable or unwilling to state specifically their reasons for dissatisfaction with the CL program.

Results of Career Ladders Pilot District Network Validation Focus-Group Interview

As mentioned earlier, a separate focus-group interview session was conducted with the members of the Career Ladders Pilot District Network (CLPDN). This interview was held during the CLPDN's regular monthly meeting, with the prior consent of the membership. The duration of the interview was between one and one-and-a half hours.

This separate interview constituted the validation sample for the focus-group sessions being conducted in the rural school district. That is, the questioning route for the CLPDN was designed to determine its overall appropriateness, in terms of the support and focus model being validated in the rural Arizona career ladders school district. CLPDN members were asked specific questions designed to assess their perceptions of the existence and interrelationship of these factors. The questions posed by the moderator to the members of the CLPDN paralleled the order and sequence of the factors as they appeared in the theoretical model. In addition, the moderator skillfully probed the same issues with the CLPDN which had repeatedly surfaced with respect to the model components during the initial round of interviews in this school district. The responses of the CLPDN thus served as a check on the internal validity of the conceptual structure being piloted in this district.

The CLPDN focus-group session generated considerable respondent interest and input. Particular comments will be summarized according to the broader themes of the model to which they pertained.

The first area of moderator questioning dealt with the role of outside policy-making bodies, such as the state board and the legislature. CLPDN members focused on the issue of accountability. More specifically, policy-makers were perceived as needing to see some tangible positive outcomes, in the form of increased student achievement, in return for the dollars being allocated to teacher-incentive programs: that is, a form of cost-benefit analysis. It was felt that this objective could also be attained by increasing

"good press" which would reach the legislative entities. Other focus-group members commented on the desire for more local control on the part of districts in establishing the specific policies and procedures of the CLP, with outside policy agencies relinquishing some of their specific control.

The need for a solid planning phase prior to actual program implementation was discussed next. Respondents agreed strongly with the need to have "readiness factors" in place to help insure successful experiences with new programs and policies. For one thing, sufficient "seed money" needed to be available for use during these initial stages. Another individual observed that Phase II districts, in particular, had experienced a real time crunch with respect to start-up activities.

Documentation of student achievement constituted a relatively large proportion of CLPDN members' interest and discussion. As before, the issue of teacher accountability was mentioned. One person felt that the documentation requirement had improved accountability in two ways: by focusing teachers' attention on more specific criteria of assessment, and by providing their evaluators a clearer sense of what is expected of teachers. This notion generated wide agreement, with another person commenting that it was necessary to define "what does teaching really do?" in terms of observable, measurable outcomes. Another felt that clear criteria are also beneficial in terms of lessening the stress associated with the teacher-evaluation process.

According to this person, teachers have tended to be afraid to test for outcomes if they are not concretely specified. In another CLPDN member's opinion, teachers did not have any incentive to demonstrate accountability and systematically assess their own and their students' progress prior to the requirements imposed by the CL program.

Another person felt that documentation had also improved the overall communication process, as a sort of positive side-effect. In particular, he/she felt that communication had improved among academic departments, across schools, and within the district as a whole. As a result, this person identified a clearer agreement as to common goals among these entities.

A sub-area of outcomes came in for special attention: the moderator asked whether social and emotional goals were being explicitly incorporated into student-achievement objectives. There was clear agreement with doing so in principle. As one respondent observed, the way in which a child feels on a

given day can markedly affect classroom performance and test results. Thus, teachers' awareness of affective factors needed to be raised by whatever means possible, even if it meant holding teachers accountable for these objectives. Another noted that a student's overall level of satisfaction is an integral aspect of the entire learning process and should be assessed in some way. One CLPDN member stated that social and emotional goals are currently a part of his/her district's CL evaluation system.

The challenge of developing valid and reliable measures for social and emotional outcomes was mentioned. However, this person also stated that this potential difficulty should not be used as an "excuse" to avoid assessing affective outcomes in the first place.

CLPDN members' interest picked up noticeably with the moderator's introduction of the professional input, ownership and teacher leadership areas of questioning. The CL program was identified as fostering leadership qualities in its participants, as a result of such formal structures as mentoring opportunities. Another remarked, "Teachers are getting control of their own destiny and future."

Moreover, the idea of teachers sharing ideas and new developments generated a considerable amount of interest. One respondent effectively related this improved communication to the aforementioned problem of isolation. According to this individual, people tend to feel most isolated when they do not have ready access to a common base of knowledge. However, this feeling had perceptibly diminished recently, due to the increased interchange among teachers.

The CL program was also credited for distinct improvements in the area of administrative leadership. One person noted that, in his/her district, the CL peer evaluators are required to "teach" the evaluation system to administrators. This practice has resulted in greater skills and understanding generally on the part of principals and assistant principals. Another CLPDN member felt that the CL program implementation had effectively resulted in an intrinsic motivator for administrators as well. This is because they now have a much better idea of what is going on in the classroom, as well as greater focus on producing better-quality teachers within their schools. Perhaps due to these reasons, there was a shared sense of greater administrative support for the CL program than had been evident during prior years.

A number of negative effects on administrators were identified by focus-group participants as well. Administrators were perceived as feeling insecure and threatened by the idea of sharing decision-making; the

idea of surrendering "turf" was mentioned. (This was balanced, however, by an opinion that such sharing of responsibilities can work effectively if all parties are perceived as acting with integrity.) Others commented on the principals' disenchantment with the large amounts of time and money required for CL implementation.

The evaluation process triggered lively discussion as to whether there should be dual instruments (for CL and non-CL teachers). All agreed that a single method of evaluation should be in place. However, some practical problems with the single approach were identified. For one thing, one person stated that there were "two different meanings" associated with identical ratings being made for CL and non-CL's. Specifically, according to a second CLPDN member, there was some resentment of the fact that more money was linked to superior CL evaluations, but not to equally superior non-CL ratings.

Finally, it was observed that principals implicitly tend to expect more from their non-CL's, which in turn triggers comparisons and jealousies. (This problem, as previously, was not recognized as being serious by all of the focus-group respondents; there was some disagreement.)

On a more positive note, respondents acknowledged that the evaluation process has triggered a need to reach consensus on the outcomes and behaviors which constitute so-called "good teaching." In other words, teacher effectiveness is being taken much more seriously as a desirable goal to be assessed. As a result, much more explicit identification of "teaching tasks" is taking place.

With respect to motivators, the extrinsic motivator of money received relatively brief attention, being mentioned by only one respondent. To balance this, a wide variety of intrinsic motivators was mentioned by focus-group participants as being associated with the CL program. These included the following:

1. increased teacher self-esteem;
2. increased teacher skills proficiency (opportunities to share one's knowledge and expertise with colleagues in a positive interactive manner);
3. (as a direct result of above role expansion) greater self-validation, and self-actualization;
4. job-enlargement, job-enrichment (by having this opportunity to expand one's professional role and take on additional duties); and

5. genuine teamwork and cooperation (as opposed to working in isolation, so frequently mentioned as a problem in the teaching profession generally).

The moderator's introduction of the topic of "de-motivators" at this point produced some spirited interchange. The first problem mentioned was that of potential burnout of ". . . highly motivated overachieveres who want to do it all." Related to this was administrators' observed tendency to overuse such overachieving candidates in the first place. The second and final area of de-motivating factors was the excessive paperwork associated with CL. As one person put it, there was still a distinct tendency to ". . . over-describe and over-document." However, the participants acknowledged a recent trend toward streamlining the documentation required; in their view, it was gradually becoming more concise and efficient. Another person observed that "There's no easy way to start the documentation expertise," suggesting that there was an inevitable 'learning curve' associated with developing more efficient evaluation procedures generally.

There was clear disagreement within the CLPDN group as to the CL's effects upon the recruitment and retention of top-quality teachers. One person expressed uncertainty as to whether the program was in fact producing the desired effects. Another countered with the opinion that CL seems to be getting the better, newer teachers to stay in the teaching profession for a longer initial period of time; that is, ". . . [they're] not opting out as early . . .."

The discussion of the organizational climate yielded primarily positive feedback -- a distinct departure from the overall tone of this component in the first round of focus-group sessions. This was especially surprising, in that the moderator broached the topic in a carefully open-ended manner: "How has organizational climate been affected by the CL program?"

Among the positive outcomes identified by CLPDN members were the following:

1. improved teacher-administrator communication;
2. improved communication among schools and levels; and
3. improved trust (especially when the staff began to observe the overall positive effects of the CL program on improved teacher skills development).

In addition, one participant alleged that one of the most frequent allegations made about the CL program was not true in his/her district. The charge that parents want their children taught only by CL teachers, with associated dissensions and dissatisfactions, was totally unfounded, in this person's opinion.

The area of negative organizational-climate outcomes was itself broached in a rather unique and quite positive manner. A vivid point was made by one CLPDN member, relative to the stresses invariably associated with the change process, such as implementation of the CL program. According to this individual, some initial negativity is almost to be expected as a matter of course during this time of temporary system disequilibrium; one would almost be suspicious if there weren't a perceptible drop in organizational climate during this time.

Two other general points were made relative to negativity in organizational climate. One person observed, "[We] must WORK at 'climate' . . .," noting in particular the evolutionary and sometimes tenuous nature of this component. Another person commented that negativity often resulted in necessary dialogue between or among opposing parties, paving the way for positive progress in the negotiation and resolution process.

A limited number of specific examples of dysfunctional organizational climate were mentioned. The evaluation process came under fire for triggering such unintended negative side effects as stress: "[One] must be a super teacher [in order to show] a gain . . .," thereby resulting in excessive pressures on teachers. Other apparent interpersonal divisiveness was attributed to salary and age differences within the staff. Another person warned of the need to guard against so-called "cultures," or cliques, which tend to form within organizational structures.

A couple of specific recommendations were made by CLPDN members with respect to improvement of organizational climate. One thought that jealousies and accusations of "special privileges" could be appreciably reduced by making CL-based inservice and other special programs open to all interested parties. Along these lines, it was noted that there should be more publicity about the benefits of such special training, thereby increasing general interest in the positive outcomes intended to be provided by CLP.

One key suggestion was made relative to improving the role and function of the steering committee. One person believed strongly that the local governing board must explicitly incorporate teacher organizations in an active way. He/she pointed out that it would be politically dangerous to exclude these organizations, especially during the critical initial stages of the planning process; that is, they needed to have a concrete "buy-in."

A second individual remarked that the steering committee also needed to have non-CL-teacher representation. (According to this person, the committee did realize this rather late but now specifically includes this sub-group in its membership.)

Finally, it was pointed out that the steering committee needed a greater diversity of opinion. The governing entity would benefit from being forced to field a variety of questions, input and comments generally.

Program designs and structures were brought up next by the moderator. Respondents expressed the opinion that there was little knowledge or agreement on the components of a "good" CL model at first. However, it has gradually evolved into an improved and well-specified structure, especially with respect to the training and responsibility requirements which should be in place at each level. In particular, respondents noted a greater level of stability and constancy in the current overall program design.

With respect to legislative guidelines, participants noted that they have in general been well received by the districts. In their opinion, this was due primarily to the legislature's willingness to grant considerable autonomy and flexibility on the local level in districts' program design planning process. Participants also felt that the idea of a periodic comprehensive review of legislative guidelines would be advisable, as a sort of internal audit.

Ongoing district-level research and development activities were perceived as a "must" in order for local CL programs to continue to survive and improve. Research results were seen as providing much-needed credibility to all proposed changes, if solid findings were available to back up recommendations, it would help insure that change is not perceived as being "arbitrary," "done for its own sake," etc. Another individual elaborated on this point, stating that staff have tended to be suspicious of decisions being made in

an "ivory-tower" manner. In this person's view, change would receive greater team support when all of those affected by it have access to the rationale behind it.

Respondents were eager to elaborate on specific aspects of the change process. In response to the moderator's request to ". . . identify what has changed, in both positive and negative directions," they produced a detailed list of improvements. The beneficial results of the change process, as identified by the CLPDN membership, included the following:

1. teachers feeling a greater sense of professionalism;
2. teachers feeling a greater sense of accountability for student learning (". . .we're being more purposeful . . .");
3. improved teacher skills development;
4. increased prominence and perceived importance of the evaluation process itself;
5. improved quality of documentation procedures (e.g., portfolios being prepared and submitted by CL teachers);
6. a gradual but perceptible streamlining of the documentation required for the evaluation process; and
7. an increased number of teacher observations.

At this point in the interview, the discussion focused on issues of district readiness to support programs such as CL. This issue once again generated considerable respondent focus and overall interest.

Three areas were specifically mentioned by CLPDN members as not being sufficiently ready for CL implementation. There were the evaluation process as a whole; the documentation process for teacher evaluation; and the lack of a cohesive, all-encompassing and agreed-upon curriculum. With respect to curriculum, one person labeled it as ". . . being there . . ." but not currently being given serious consideration by teachers. The only discernible progress in this direction, according to another respondent, was that ". . . CRT tests have been looked at, updated and rewritten."

According to the CLPDN, finance and funding was too narrowly specified. One person thought that it was stipulated so as to benefit ". . . a large district with many teachers on the CL." There was an expressed need for a minimal dollar amount to be budgeted to cover administrative expenditures, so as not to

put smaller districts at a disadvantage. Another problem related to insufficient funding being available for inservice and outside-consultant activities. It was stated that most of the available total money must go to cover teacher salaries, leaving little or nothing for such essential teacher-development activities.

The CLPDN focus-group interview concluded with the respondents being asked to offer other suggested improvements. One person felt that Phase III districts are in dire need of better-formulated long-range planning strategies, as well as sufficient time for the planning process. This person voiced his/her frustrations concerning hasty implementation, eleventh-hour rewriting activities, and a requirement to complete six sets of evaluations, all during a relatively short interval of time.

Others mentioned the desirability of utilizing outside resources on a regular basis. For instance, mention was made of the Far West Labs presentation, which had preceded the CLPDN focus-group session, dealing with the Career Ladders program in Utah. Another thought that the Arizona Education Association (AEA) could be of greater assistance (especially to struggling Phase III's) with respect to inservice and other communication activities. A third individual felt that there ought to be more collaborative-type of activities between and among different districts, such as inviting one's fellow CL districts to share in bringing in outside speakers and seminars.

Summary Comments: Career Ladder Pilot District
Network Focus-Group Validation Interview

The session with CLPDN members essentially corroborated the existence, interrelationships and importance with the proposed support and focus-factor elements of the CL model. Participants reacted positively and with interest to these elements as presented through the questioning route. This serves as evidence of good internal validity, or specification of the model.

There were distinct areas of agreement, as well as disagreement, with the comments made by the rural school district focus-group participants. Both the CLPDN and the school district subjects agreed strongly with the importance of focusing a program such as CL on the assessment of student achievement outcomes and related teacher accountability.

The notion of "district readiness" also received considerable respondent attention and agreement. The related issue of evaluation processes also generated respondents' interest in both groups. There was

clear consensus on the desirability for a uniform instrument for both CL and non-CL teachers. On the other hand, while the current evaluation instruments were perceived as being too cumbersome and elaborate in some cases, subjects generally felt optimistic about the eventual focus and streamlining of the evaluation process.

Both groups were able to identify key areas which needed massive improvement before a program such as CL could be successfully implemented. There was clear agreement that certain factors were not at a sufficient level of development to support successful implementation of a program such as CL. The need to identify these underlying factors, as well as to spend carefully budgeted amounts of time and money in a long-range planning process, were acknowledged in both settings.

With respect to motivation, both groups contradicted a finding which had been almost consistently labeled as a "negative" of the CL program: the issue of money. While there was some acknowledgement of jealousies inherent in salary differences, overall the two groups tended to downplay the overall significance and importance of this factor.

The topic of organizational climate came in for considerable interest and discussion in both groups. One area of obvious agreement was the evolutionary nature of organizational climate; that is, the need to monitor its status on an ongoing basis and move in the direction of corrective change as needed.

Despite these areas of distinct overlap, there was distinct disagreement in opinion between the rural Arizona career ladders school district and the CLPDN focus-group participants. Perhaps the sharpest areas of difference were in teacher and administrator leadership. CLPDN subjects felt that there was far more sharing of ideas among teachers going on than did the rural school district subjects. Administrators were also identified by the latter group as not having a sufficient "buy-in" into the CL system, which perhaps explained their lack of input. The CLPDN members, in contrast, characterized the level of administrator involvement in primarily positive terms. They also felt that principals and assistant principals were playing an increasingly significant role in CLP implementation and development.

With respect to organizational climate, both sets of respondents' interest levels were identically high; however, the emotional tone of their feedback was not. When the topic was raised in an open-ended manner with the CLPDN, the feedback given (relative to the effect of CL upon organizational climate) was

overwhelmingly positive. This was not the case with the rural school district's participants, however. While some positive effects were noted by these subjects, the bulk of their time was spent in identifying dysfunctional interpersonal effects.

In general, the CLPDN session could be characterized as validating the support and focus factors which had been hypothesized prior to the focus-group research. In the third and final phase, a follow-up series of focus-group interviews was conducted with the school district subjects. Individual questioning routes for this second round were carefully developed to probe special sub-areas of respondent interest and involvement which became evident during the first series. These will be elaborated in the section to follow.

Results of the Rural Arizona Career Ladders School District Focus-Group Procedures: Second Series

As mentioned earlier, the basic format and procedure for conducting the follow-up interview sessions was similar to that of the first focus-group series. However, the questions posed to each sub-group during the second round were designed to concentrate more on particular areas of interest which had emerged during the first interview.

In addition, three of the original seven groups were unable to be scheduled for a second interview. These were the school-board members, the central-office staff and the parents. To compensate for this unforeseen contingency, the researchers decided to hold a special "open-group" session as the last focus-group interview. The planned purpose of this open group was to accommodate any and all participants who could not come to a regularly scheduled interview session. By doing so, it was hoped that a more thorough and representative sampling of opinion would result.

Focus-Group Interview with Steering-Committee Members

Two topics seemed to occupy the general interest of these subjects during the second interview session. These were the perceived lack of administrative support, especially as it affected the other support and focus factors of the developmental model; and the issue of organizational climate.

Steering-committee subjects repeatedly focused on their perceived apathy of administrators relative to all aspects of CL program implementation. This was especially evident in administrators' refusal to

attend steering-committee sessions, despite attempts to accommodate meeting times to their own schedules. (One steering-committee member colorfully pointed out that, for those principals who HAVE attended special workshops, etc., ". . . [they] wouldn't be able to tell you three or four main themes of 'effective schools'!") Furthermore, subjects pointed out that steering-committee business was repeatedly placed last on meeting agendas. When mention of CL business was made, principals typically signalled their disinterest and boredom with their body language, according to a third subject.

This lack of administrative support was especially evident in the communication process. One steering-committee member related the account of the announcement of the second focus-group meeting itself as evidence of this problem. According to this individual, the meeting was announced at the end of the sixth class period, just three minutes prior to the closing bell. Furthermore, the announcement itself was not even made by a principal or vice-principal, but by a member of the office staff, which seemed to serve as further evidence of lack of importance. Finally, the details of the announcement were garbled, further confusing the intended recipients.

Perhaps symptomatic of poor communication with administration generally, there seemed to be a murky perception of the decision-making structure. In response to the moderator's probe, the subjects were unable to identify who, exactly, constituted the 'power structure,' as well as who was impeding program progress. One person observed that the channels of communication could be characterized as "platitudes and generalizations; and ALL are guilty of it."

Another focus-group participant agreed with the cavalier manner in which CL-related announcements were communicated by administrators, providing a second example concerning this year's distribution of the Perception Assessment Scale (PAS) surveys. He/she pointed out that the PAS announcement was similarly garbled, leaving CL teachers with the (erroneous) impression that their participation was optional.

Near the end of the focus-group session, one steering-committee member graphically summarized the implications of perceived administrative apathy. This person commented that teachers would feel more of a sense of professional input and ownership, as well as reduced feelings of isolation generally, if there were more perceived support on the part of the administration.

Poor communication was also symptomatic of organizational-climate problems, as discussed by the members of the steering committee. Respondents complained of a lack of follow-up on comments, questions, and suggestions; one person said, "[We're] told to follow the chain of command, but then it's dropped into a 'black hole'; [there's] no follow-up." Another observed, ". . . the ball gets dropped at a certain spot." Furthermore, there did not seem to exist a viable inter-organizational "grapevine" to help expedite the informal information-dissemination process. However, there was clear acknowledgement that these sorts of interpersonal problems pre-dated the implementation of the CL program. In addition, another subject felt that ". . . SOME people DO get listened to."

In addition to poor communication, the effects of NEGATIVE communication were seen as extremely detrimental to organizational climate by the members of the steering committee. Reminiscent of an issue that emerged during the first round of interviewing, one subject referred to the negative reporting of the Gallup newspapers concerning the low test scores, etc., in the school district. Another person pointed out that this negativity has been reinforced by the school board, whose members have publicly blamed CL teachers for the poor standardized-test-score results being reported in the news media. One steering-committee member also pointed out the inevitable and harmful consequences upon the district's self-esteem and self-image of such publicity. It was suggested that "equal time" be given to "accentuating the positive"; e.g., publicizing such successful results as the "host" program, whereby gifted students tutor their peers.

Expanding the overall issue of self-image, one person noted, "If you ask teachers, 'how often have you [received] praise,' it'd result in some low numbers." This comment generated considerable respondent interest and agreement, with another individual describing a teacher who received only one positive comment in the evaluation process.

Another participant, citing the recent writings on "The Peter Principle" and especially the book In Search of Excellence, suggested that building in "planned positive feedback" would go a long way toward correcting the low collective self-image. It would also measurably improve interpersonal relationships in general.

Interpersonal relationships were variously labeled as consisting of "suspicion", "jealousy," and the like. One person attributed the jealousies to the often-trivial objectives which supposedly relate to progressing up different levels of the ladder. Another steering-committee member felt that dissatisfaction was due to the policy of holding too many unproductive meetings.

A number of dramatic and colorful quotes could best summarize the perceived poor state of organizational climate. There was clear and wide agreement with one person's comment that, "This used to be a real[ly] fun place to work; [now it's] no fun anymore." Another individual noted, "The unhappiness surrounding you will rub off on the organizational climate." ". . . if things don't change," according to a third subject, "we'll repeat history."

The overall tone of this area of discussion, however, was not entirely negative. The steering-committee members made a number of specific suggestions to help improve the quality of organizational climate. They recognized the need for a better sense of teamwork among teachers. Subjects eagerly supported one person's proposal of the idea of "effective champions," or especially respected and recognized individuals within the district who have the necessary 'political clout' to see a good idea through to its implementation -- akin to the concept of "opinion leaders" in group-behavioral psychology. Related to the previous issue of interest, another person felt that more overt support and interest on the part of administrators would filter down to an improved organizational climate.

The session with the steering committee also dealt with the issue of committee effectiveness. Committee meetings were characterized generally as being unproductive and inefficient by the steering-committee members. Some specific phrases used to describe its functioning included ". . . [a] band-aid operation . . ." and ". . . [one in which] lots of problems get UNsolved . . .." The sporadic time-lines of committees came in for special criticism, with one person observing that communication typically shuts down entirely by late spring and summer, only to be followed by a deluge of required paperwork and tight deadlines.

With regard to program designs and structures, the need for clear and agreed-upon goals was voiced by steering-committee participants. As in previous areas, the need for solid administrative support was agreed upon as a necessary prerequisite for goal-setting to be maximally successful. Goals also needed to be

more tangible, according to one person, such as "to provide one hour of coaching during the normal school day at X school."

Along these lines, it was also explicitly recognized by the group that student achievement and teacher accountability needed to be the focus of program design. One person observed that "Teachers should make learning as easy as possible, and THEN do the hard work resulting in learning!" Another spoke of the need to achieve a "good fit" between the student and the learning process. It was felt generally that teacher excellence DOES exist but IN ISOLATION. The recurring desire of greater administrative support was also mentioned at this point, as potentially improving teacher skills development and accountability generally.

One particular aspect of program design came in for extended discussion by the members of the steering committee: the evaluation process. Respondents acknowledged the cumbersome nature of the process, especially for (already overworked) principals who now, in essence, had to "keep two sets of books." While one evaluation might not be sufficient, according to another person, the request for repeated observation and review would only over-burden evaluators to a greater degree. Perhaps in a related vein, another person complained of the relative terseness of most evaluation feedback: "If you get little feedback, it means [that] something's wrong!" One subject used a graphic and amusing analogy to characterize the consequent lack of trust: he/she likened it to an experiment with the highway patrol issuing 'good-driver' tickets, which was intended to improve morale but only served to increase suspiciousness and fear! Finally, the ratings themselves came in for scrutiny as to their actual validity. One subject described his/her own initial experience as an evaluee, getting "all fives" on the first evaluation. However, subsequently there was an external accusation of "easy raters," followed shortly thereafter by this person's ratings dropping. It was naturally hard for this person to tell if the drop signified a true decline in his/her teaching effectiveness or an over-reaction to the aforementioned rumor/accusation.

The last major area of discussion with steering-committee members was the current lack of "readiness," as well as the need for a solid, long-range planning process, prior to the successful implementation of programs such as CLP. One person thought that the school district prematurely bought into the idea of EEI without sufficient scrutiny of possible alternatives: ". . . [it is] not a bad idea but not

the ONLY idea . . .." Another expressed a desire to ". . . put [the CL] on hold and get what we already have working well."

Focus-Group Interview with Principals and Assistant Principals

In a strikingly complementary vein to the discussion with steering-committee members, administrators devoted a considerable portion of their interview session to their own lack of percieved involvement and input into programs such as CL. They also acknowledged that the purpose of the CL program seems to have been widely misunderstood by the district. However, unlike the steering committee, administrators were far more inclined both to attribute other existing problems to the CL and to want to scrap the program.

There seemed to be consensus that administrators have been unfairly excluded from key aspects of the evaluation process. On the one hand, they are required to do additional voluminous paperwork; however, they have no say in the CL placement process. This whole topic, in fact, yielded considerable emotional response, particularly expressed anger and frustration, on the part of focus-group participants. They also returned repeatedly to this area during the interview session.

One administrator noted, "I'm so confused about evaluations that [the process] has gotten me down." Another virtually thanked the moderator for bringing up the topic in the first place, commenting, "I've been working until 10:00 at night . . . to get the necessary evaluation paperwork done." Another subject claimed that three-fourths of his/her time was being currently taken up by compliance with CL documentation procedures.

This disillusionment was also evident with respect to the assessment of student achievement. When the moderator attempted to open discussion of student achievement and its specific documentation with administrators, the reaction was ". . . [we] don't see it; [we] don't know how it's done." In fact, one principal claimed that he/she was not even shown the ITBS scores from his/her own district. Another individual complained of having unacceptable objectives submitted to him/her by a CL teacher -- yet not having sufficient authority within the CL program structure to require satisfactory revision.

Principals' frustrations at being "relative outsiders" in the process also specifically extended to committee-type input and involvement. For one thing, they claimed that there are too many such committees already in existence which seem to require administrators' attention. One person noted, "I'd go, not even knowing which committee I'm going to!" Another pointed out that meetings tended to be scheduled at times which were inconvenient for principals. A third commented (of his/her experience with the student progress committee) that, while it was initially a useful source of information concerning the CL program, the meetings gradually became more and more unproductive. The feeling concerning committees could perhaps best be summed up by the following colorful quote: ". . . [they have] no affect or effect!"

A special case of this problem concerned principals' involvement in steering-committee activities. To be more specific, there seemed to be genuine confusion on the part of administrative focus-group participants as to whether they were, in fact, de facto members of the steering committee in the first place (as claimed by one subject).

With regard to CL program designs and structures, respondents' comments centered primarily on the perceived purpose of the program, especially as it was currently being perceived within the district. The monetary rewards appeared to be targeted towards those who write well, as well as those who executed meaningless projects, in the opinion of this group. Furthermore, the available funds were being primarily earmarked for greater salaries, at the expense of being invested in necessary programs to improve teacher effectiveness.

The design process itself was criticized in relation to the preceding issue of lack of administrative input. One individual characterized the process as "clandestine;" ". . . it must happen at night!"

There was also concern on the part of administrators as to teachers' placement and effective utilization within the CL program. One principal knew of ". . . four excellent teachers not making CL." Another person criticized the program's apparent tendency to assign the more gifted students to the CL teachers. This subject felt that, in terms of CL teachers' alleged improved skills development, that it should be the other way around. That is, CL's should theoretically possess the necessary capability for teaching the low-achieving students.

The administrators did produce a long list of suggestions in response to the moderator's probe for "what projects should be instituted as part of 'job enlargement'?" These included the following:

1. taking students on field trips on weekends and after hours;
2. participating in special activities, such as running the school newspaper; and
3. offering tutoring and other services to students after school hours.

In general, principals readily acknowledged teachers' willingness to stay after hours and to do more. However, they felt that this extra time was not currently being utilized to maximum effect, particularly within the constraints of the CL program. What was needed, in their view, was a candid assessment and some creative brainstorming on ways that teachers' extra time could be used more effectively.

The introduction of the sub-area of evaluation resurfaced the administrators' concerns over the cumbersome nature of the process. One observed, ". . . we don't need 4-5 pages! We already know the good teachers." Another re-expressed concern over the trivial nature of the objectives being set by teachers. A third voiced some confusion over complying with the letter, as opposed to the spirit, of some of the overly-specified ground rules of the evaluation process: "If a lesson plan is not turned in, do I give [that teacher] all zeroes?!" As before, the administrative focus-group participants bemoaned their perceived lack of input generally.

With regard to teacher accountability, the principals admitted that there are too many other uncontrollable variables which can impinge upon the single numeric measure of student gain, which currently typically go unnoticed. This was especially true in the usage of standardized test scores, such as the ITBS.

A final overall point regarding the evaluation process had to do with principals' ongoing role. It was stressed, by one focus-group participant, that there IS day-to-day monitoring and observation relative to student growth: "We haven't lessened our responsibilities in any way."

Principals did provide positive feedback concerning the perceived effectiveness of peer evaluators. The latter were characterized generally as being "nice people." One individual peer evaluator was singled out for special praise at this point, for being a ". . . hard worker, enthusiastic, [and] fair, valid [e.g., her evaluations agreeing in general with those done by principals for a given teacher]." One administrative

subject suggested that perhaps ONE person should be delegated the task of doing all of the peer evaluations. In this respondent's opinion, such a policy would help alleviate the widespread complaint of too much disruption of the learning process, as a result of the [multiple] peer evaluators being pulled out of their own classrooms periodically.

Nowhere was the misunderstanding relative to the goals of the CL program more evident than in the response given to the moderator's comment that the goals of CL and "effective schools" are theoretically the same. The answer was a puzzled, "THEY ARE?" Another person added, at this point, that the general feeling was that the primary goal fo CL was "to pay teachers more money"; in fact, this comment was attributed to the student-progress committee itself.

One negative aspect mentioned had to do with perceived inequities attributed to program designs and structures. One person noted his/her futile attempts at getting CL's to volunteer for extra duties, such as helping out with school dances in the evening. In this person's opinion, CL's routinely ducked such duties, as "they're not academically oriented." On the contrary, principals felt that ". . . if you get paid more, then you should give more."

The area of organizational climate was characterized in primarily dysfunctional terms by the administrative focus group. In particular, principals felt "caught in the middle" between warring CL and non-CL factions. With regard to a perceived lack of teamwork one person noted, ". . . it takes two to three days after a CL meeting . . . to bring teachers back together." The climate was also described as consisting of overstressed individuals and correspondingly low morale.

Money received only scant attention in its role as an extrinsic motivator. The comment was made that ". . . some teachers [are] willing to jump hoops for money; but there are good teachers who [aren't willing]."

As with the steering committee, there was criticism of the lack of long-range planning and the disregard of essential "readiness" factors. That is, there was a clear sense of "crisis-type management" being followed: "[Plans currently] develop as we go along." Administrative subjects readily acknowledged the long-range nature of any corrective process with regard to successful program implementation. They agreed that positive changes might not be readily apparent for a number of years.

The school board was described by administrative focus-group participants as being "too new" for them to gauge its potential effectiveness. One person commented, "I don't thing they [board members] know enough to solve problems."

Focus-group participants also readily generated a list of suggestions for improvement. (Returning to their frustration with perceived lack of input, one person pointed out that they had suggested such things in the past but had never received any follow-up on their ideas.) These suggestions included the following:

1. more research relative to the concept of "cooperative learning;"
2. brainstorming on more ways to involve parents;
3. moving generally in the direction of "school improvement," with an acknowledged need to allow an eight-year minimum if necessary for long-range changes to be apparent;
4. a "one-lane salary schedule," with a minimum of required inservice and participation by all teachers;
5. a clearly acknowledged need to find better ways to reward and motivate the truly effective teachers (memorably and colorfully summed up by one administrator as, "[We] need the cream of the crop to rise to the top!;" and
6. more money budgeted to teach, demonstrate and improve teacher skills, as well as to revamp and streamline the evaluation instrument (as opposed to being earmarked entirely/primarily for salary increases).

As mentioned at the outset, principals tended to blame the CL for existing problems and to want to see it scrapped. A more moderate opinion was expressed that "We should review CL for a year and start over." The most important point to be kept in mind, according to another respondent, was that the CL should be designed to fit the needs of an individual school; and NOT vice versa. (This individual graphically compared the current implementation process to the tossing-around of a beach ball; he/she characterized the CL coordinator as being buffeted by the shifts in power between competing interest groups, with resultant instability in program rules.) A third individual suggested that perhaps a program such as CL could be more effectively incorporated under an all-encompassing "umbrella" program such as "effective schools." By doing so, this respondent felt that the incentive program would benefit ALL

teachers, as opposed to a "selected elite." Moreover, its goals would be more in line with effective instruction as a result.

Focus-Group Interview with Career Ladder Teachers

In this particular follow-up session, there was repeated reference to the "low-self-esteem" problem touched upon in the preceding two groups. Career Ladder teachers also expressed detailed interest in the areas of leadership and organizational climate.

Respondents readily acknowledged that administrators currently ". . . don't have a buy-in . . ." into the CL program. One principal was characterized as not coming to the necessary training session and therefore not knowing how to use the CL evaluation instrument. In fact, there was wide agreement that administrators' attendance at related meetings and workshops has been sporadic at best. As a result, they are unable to keep up with the latest developments in CL program requirements.

One CL subject characterized administrators' actions generally as inconsistent: "Principals shift gears . . .." Another complained of principals' observed tendency to put off necessary tasks until the last minute.

Problems such as the above were attributed by CL focus-group participants to insecurity on the part of administrators. More specifically, administrators were characterized as afraid of losing their jobs. In fact, one CL teacher made the point that, in terms of organizational climate generally (to be discussed in greater detail below), perceived insecurity was attributable not to teachers, but to administrators.

The topic of organizational climate produced some clear and forceful agreement on the current state of problems. There was a shared perception that the CL program was being blamed for problems which actually existed prior to its inception. Another individual made mention of vocal CL critics who couldn't, or wouldn't, produce a rationale for their complaints. (A graphic example of such 'groundless critics' was provided by one individual, in his/her account of the CL application process. This person recalled being told by a dissenter that "The good teachers aren't on the CL!", yet receiving no response to his/her question, "How do YOU know?!") Such problems were attributed by the respondents to fear associated with the existence of CL, as well as "passive resistance" to the program.

In a sharp difference in focus of discussion with their non-CL counterparts, CL teachers were unanimous on the point that they DO, in fact, interact and share ideas with non-CLs. As one person pointed out, "We'd be ostracized [otherwise], since we're in the minority!" A humorous counter-example to this accusation concerned the focus-group session itself. One CL participant mentioned that the only thing he/she has tried to "hide" from non-CL's was his/her attendance at the focus-group itself -- obviously fearing retaliation, ostracism, etc., on the part of the non-CL subgroup.

One especially prevalent problem with organizational climate was the issue of insufficient communication. One CL teacher told of not being informed that certain of his/her students had prior permission to leave class to attend Federal programs -- thereby resulting in their being placed on the "ditch list" in error.

The area of collective self-esteem came in for detailed discussion with regard to the expressed need for increased feedback and support. There was clear positive response and unanimous respondent interest when the moderator observed that the school district ought to have a ". . . better self-concept than most." This led to the response that teachers tend to operate in isolation in this district. There was also wide agreement with the comment that "We need to be told that we're doing positive things." As with previous groups, mention was made at this point of the negative (and potentially harmful) reporting on the district being done by the Gallup newspapers.

In terms of internal rules and regulations, another consistent source of indignity and lowered self-esteem was identified. One CL teacher complained of having to stand in line for one's paycheck, as opposed to receiving it personally (along with a "thank-you") from the principal, at least once during the school year.

Respondents had no trouble producing a list of workable ways to incorporate image-building into day-to-day operations. Suggestions included the following:

1. a monthly newsletter (publicizing positive outcomes) issued by the superintendent and/or school board;
2. disseminating a similar newsletter to the parents and to the community at large, perhaps by placing it in banks, etc.; and

3. printing the honor roll.

At this point, an exchange took place which was perhaps symptomatic of the insufficient feedback and communication being reported by participants. One subject (in generating the above list of improvements) mentioned more effective utilization of the school district's "P.R. person." The comment was met with widespread confusion and surprise, causing another individual to ask, "Oh, we HAVE a P.R. person?!"

The area of effective leadership was discussed from several aspects. There was clear and unanimous agreement as to the need for "long-lived leadership," as well as an overt commitment to long-range planning. However, the current decision-making process was depicted as clearly ineffectual. For one thing, there was a perception of "information being locked up in committees." Later on in the discussion, another CL focus-group participant noted that there are "A million committees; and: 1. no one knows what they all are; and 2. the 'core group' will be a problem [in dominating these committees]."

The CL program coordinator was faulted on several grounds. First of all, he was perceived as not exercising his mandated authority to maximum effect. In particular, he was described both as afraid to take a stand on key issues, and trying too hard to pacify too many diverse factions. The coordinator came in for particular criticism for extending compliance deadlines in what was perceived in an arbitrary and capricious manner. Some subjects thought that he did this because ". . . he hates to have people dislike him . . .;" however, as countered by another individual, ". . . 'niceness' works at the start only . . ." and can clearly be overdone.

However, the participants also had a number of positive comments to make regarding the CL coordinator. He was praised for being a good listener; ". . . his door is always open." They also thought that in many instances he was being put in the position of "scapegoat" and not seriously listened to, in return, by the powers-that-be.

The steering committee was described by CL teachers as acting somewhat in isolation; however, CL participants also thought that this isolation was of its own volition. The school board, as in previous interview sessions, was characterized as ". . . too new and afraid . . ." to effect any meaningful reform.

A number of observations were made relative to CL program designs and structures. One person characterized the CL process as "a writing contest." Another thought that there ought to be more explicit position descriptions. He/she specifically referred to mentor-teachers being "boxed in," and "in a gray area," with subsequent confusion and evasion of key responsibilities.

With regard to recruitment and retention, there was unanimous agreement with the opinion that CL program participation should remain VOLUNTARY. For one thing, a teacher close to retirement would probably have no real incentive to apply. Another person mentioned that forced participation would result in anger and resentment, which in turn would further harm the state of organizational climate. However, there was also a pervasive feeling that more teachers perceived as "capable" SHOULD be on the CL program. Yet, in an interesting summary dissenting opinion, one teacher pointed out, ". . . more people ARE buying into it [CL] each year, applying and hanging in there -- so somehow it's GROWING!"

One rather unique aspect of the CL program which triggered a fiery emotional response from CL focus-group participants had to do with the program name itself. One person objected strongly and vocally to the "merit-pay" aspect of the system, which was often (and erroneously) used synonymously with CL. However, there was an interesting response given to the emotionally loaded connotations of labeling. One person gave the example of someone saying "focusing" would NOT be done in his/her classroom -- and yet the particular teacher was probably doing it anyway, without even realizing it.

As with other groups, the evaluation process came in for detailed discussion. There was some broad agreement with the cumbersome nature of the documentation process, including the fact that it probably deterred some potentially good teachers from applying for the CL in the first place. A large number of focus-group participants agreed with the expressed need to streamline and collapse some of the current categories. One person reminded participants that the current system had been more or less "thrown together" a year ago and adopted somewhat in desperation. There was also dissatisfaction expressed with the "nebulous" nature of some of the specified criteria.

Not everyone saw the detail of the evaluation instrument as a negative, however. According to one CL teacher, the detail was, at least, "clear-cut," which in turn could help to foster a perception of greater fairness on the part of evaluees. Moreover, while some persons thought that the length of the instrument

promoted burnout on the part of teachers, others felt that there was a perceptible improvement in streamlining the evaluation process in recent times.

Peer evaluators were also exclusively praised by CL focus-group participants. One individual characterized them as "fair and honest." Another said (combining perceptions of the detailed evaluation process as well as the peer evaluators): ". . . everything is documented." Another noted, "[The process] takes time, but at least you have professionalism . . .."

The need for greater parental involvement in the learning process also emerged from the CL follow-up focus group discussion. Teachers referred to their frustrations and (often-futile) attempts to get parents more involved. Furthermore, their specific suggestions for increasing parental involvement appeared to be squelched by top administrators, analogously to other ideas submitted.

Motivators (intrinsic and extrinsic) received relatively scant attention from this group. With regard to the moderator's request for examples of the former, only one comment was made: ". . . others see you are being responsible for everything." Virtually no discussion about money ensued, except for one teacher who expressed surprise that (with regard to program designs and structures dealing with salary increases) "the amount had changed."

Long-range planning and readiness factors yielded the same sorts of comments that were made in other focus-group sessions. There was clear agreement with the moderator's contention that a workable program could conceivably take six to eight years to develop. One teacher observed, "So many things are imposed and [subsequently] dropped."

Focus-Group Interview with Non-Career Ladder Teachers

Surprisingly enough, the topic which generated repeated interest on the part of these subjects was the issue of student achievement. These teachers also expressed detailed concern about the evaluation process. Organizational climate, and collective self-esteem in particular, warranted special attention.

Poor communication seemed to characterize the current state of knowledge about documentation of student achievement. Participants were unable to respond to the moderator's question, "How is student

achievement being documented?" Subjects attributed this lack of knowledge to the "isolation" and "fragmentation" which seemed to characterize the district generally.

Non-Career Ladder teachers also spent quite a bit of time in this area complaining about students who possess a cavalier attitude toward standardized test-taking; in effect, according to these subjects, they mark anything at all on their test papers. When the moderator suggested seriously teaching test-taking skills, one teacher replied that this strategy HAD been tried but to no avail. There was wide agreement with one teacher's comment that "They [students] CAN learn how [to take tests; but] they WON'T." This problem was attributed by focus-group participants to parental unemployment and parents' not appreciating the usefulness of schooling generally. When the moderator spoke of the interest expressed in the first parents' focus group, the reply was that such parents are "atypical."

Discussion of the evaluation process yielded some memorable examples of dysfunction. One non-CL teacher bemoaned the fact that CL's get "points" awarded for such activities as "playing a clown," "blowing up balloons," and the like. There were also accusations of measurements and written evaluations being "doctored," as well as an account of one CL teacher who keeps four specially prepared lesson plans just for evaluations. One person attributed this to an inordinate pressure felt by all teachers to account for student progress.

Organizational climate was characterized primarily in negative terms by the non-CL group. In particular, they spoke of divisiveness and ill will between CL's and non-CL's. There was expressed resentment at special privileges allegedly being awarded to CL teachers, such as release time to attend workshops. One non-CL teacher complained of being forced to give up scarce planning time in order to attend CLs' so-called "isolated little projects," being conducted for the sole purpose of accumulating points for CL teachers. Another person resented having to cover CLs' responsibilities "while they go and observe." There was agreement with this point; one teacher noted the resultant tension and disruption of efficient teaching due to teachers being pulled out of their own classrooms. Finally, there was the familiar (from the last session) allegation raised, concerning CLs' apparent unwillingness to communicate and share ideas with non-CLs.

The program itself took a large share of the blame for these climate dysfunctions. One individual characterized the CL program as "a pecking order," with "no team-building;" he/she added that "each teacher cares about his or her own domain" only. The CL program was also described by another subject as "political," with "ins" and "outs."

However, an interesting thematic turnaround took place when the moderator remarked at this point that the non-CL's seemed to be the ONLY ones blaming the program for problems which others believed had in fact pre-dated Career Ladders. At this comment, there was also wide agreement that ". . . [there were] cliques before this [CL] came . . .." The moderator probed for attitudinal direction by remarking, "It's amazing that a PROGRAM could do that!", to which one reply was, "It's NOT the PROGRAM; it's the PEOPLE!"

With respect to low collective perceived self-esteem, there was a generally expressed perception among the non-CL teachers of "not getting sufficient strokes." One person recalled being told that the school system was ". . . a carniverous place," to which he/she replied, "Well, I AM one!"

There was a pervasive belief on the part of non-CLs that the CL teachers are interested only in the extrinsic motivator of money. On the other hand (related to the above topic of self-esteem), subjects felt that another, intrinsic, motivator was potentially more powerful: "A moment of appreciation is worth more than money." Another individual felt that those who make twice as much money should in turn do twice as much work . . . as opposed to one-half, which is the way in which CL's were perceived, productivity-wise, by this respondent.

Administrators earned some sympathy from the non-CL's for having to do additional paperwork required by the CL program. There was also wide agreement with one person's contention that principals act fairly and do not appear to show favoritism.

Respondents used some colorful phrases to describe the hasty way in which CL was implemented. One commented, "It was SHOT IN, as opposed to WEANED IN." Another remarked that it " . . . hit from the superintendent and splattered . . .." Such haphazard implementation was evidently characteristic of program phase-ins; a third person stated, "So many programs are in and out; we don't know how long

they'll last." A fourth individual attributed this problem to greed; he/she felt that the sole motivation for the district's bringing in a program like CL is to get Federal dollars.

There was clear and overt agreement when the moderator attempted to summarize the non-CLs' apparent sources of dissatisfaction. Among the problems characterizing the district, the following seemed to be most serious: unacceptably low collective self-esteem; stress; intergroup and interpersonal hostilities; "no happiness" generally; and program elements operating in isolation, with no coordination in implementation. Finally, there was applause at the end of the session when the moderator stated, "You need to establish a 'success' program for the kids; compare them on 'successes'; NOT 'failures'!"

"Open-Meeting" Focus-Group Interview

As stated in the introduction to this section, the researchers decided to set up an open-forum meeting, in order to accommodate those subjects who did not have an opportunity to participate in one (or both) of the regularly scheduled sessions. This interview was well-attended and yielded comments which triggered high levels of respondent interest and feedback.

The largest single issue discussed by the heterogeneous "open group" was the area of evaluation systems. There was repeated and multiple dissatisfaction expressed with the idea of a single summative evaluation as supposedly "representative" of a teacher's activities and capabilities. One recent CL applicant characterized the evaluation process as ". . . just a one-shot deal to showcase everything . . ." where, in fact, it should also be a "learning situation," whereby a teacher can correct deficiencies. Another person noted the overt sense of relief on the part of teachers when the "single" evaluation was over. A third described a colleague who used the SAME lesson plan for submission to the principal and the peer evaluator. A fourth teacher claimed that he/she never received the (theoretically required) follow-up post-session with the evaluator.

There was also heavy criticism from this group concerning the cumbersome paperwork required in the evaluation process. "[There is] too much paperwork on nothing." "[We] owe the kids more than just paperwork." Another participant singled out the computer for adding to the paperwork burden, as opposed to helping to expedite it. However, this was countered by an opinion that the process did seem to be

getting more streamlined during recent times; that is, ". . . more down-to-earth; more concrete." Another person concurred, describing a prospective MIS (management information system) installation as a way of further streamlining the documentation, ". . . to centralize and avoid duplication of efforts."

One vivid and detailed suggestion was made regarding a proposed alternative evaluation system: make one brief lesson plan weekly; send one copy to the CL office; and also submit a daily diary of activities (the last to be used as an aid in the teacher's daily planning activities, in addition to providing detailed and multiple documentation to evaluators). This person also felt that the summertime could be put to better evaluative advantage, by reviewing the entire staff during this period. According to this respondent, such documentation would resolve the problem inherent in ". . . a single lesson plan constitut[ing] 180 days . . .."

The second major area of focus for the open group was the area of CL program designs and structures. There was clear agreement that the program components currently appeared to be operating in isolation. Considerable concern was also expressed that the CL program is TEACHER-oriented, as opposed to STUDENT-oriented. In general, the inordinate amount of time needed to comply with the voluminous program requirements was perceived as hurting teacher effectiveness. "Change-for-the-sake-of-change" was also recognized as a problem in program implementation. Finally, the placement process came under fire for not addressing individual teacher differences sufficiently or adequately.

Organizational climate was not as negatively described in the open session as in other focus groups. One person characterized the alleged negatives as ". . . more 'misunderstandings' than 'hostilities' . . .." Some conflicts and jealousies had admittedly been observed by participants; however, when the moderator asked "Who's responsible?", the clear and immediate reply was "ALL of us!" All subjects agreed that communication needed to be improved.

With regard to motivators, only the extrinsic motivator of money was mentioned. There was an apparent perception of CL's 'selling out' for additional money, with one respondent noting, "[I] wouldn't hurt the students for an extra $ 8,000."

There was support expressed generally by this group for the efforts of the CL program coordinator. One person commented, "I've heard people putting down [the CL Coordinator], but he's doing his best . .

.." There was understanding and agreement that he could not be expected to effect major changes in a relatively short period of time.

The last major topic of concern for the open group was the need for long-range planning and sufficient levels of "readiness" of key factors prior to program implementation. Past approaches were characterized as ". . . shotgunning it . . .." Another person advised, "Let's do one thing at a time!"

Summary Comments: Second Series of Focus-Group Interviews

The five separate interview sessions resulted in considerable convergence of opinion as to problem areas. To begin with, the area of administrative leadership was seen as deficient. There was agreement, however, that principals and assistant principals critically need a "buy-in" into programs such as CL in order to justify their already-scarce time and efforts on program compliance requirements.

CL program requirements were faulted on several grounds. As before, the biggest complaint concerned CL teachers being removed from their classes for frequent attendance at special workshops and meetings. This policy created distinct problems from two perspectives. In the first place, students' learning processes were seen as being needlessly disrupted by the repeated absence of their "regular" teachers. Moreover, non-CL teachers appeared to resent what they perceived as "special privileges" awarded to their CL counterparts, in the form of workshops which were not open to non-CL participants.

The evaluation process, despite acknowledged efforts at streamlining in recent times, was still perceived as way too cumbersome. Others criticized the seemingly trivial objectives being set and for which CL teachers were currently being awarded points in the evaluation system. The open group, in particular, felt that a single summative evaluation was invalid and deprived the teacher of demonstrating improvement in technique. Finally, some of the current criteria were characterized as being too vague. According to all participants, goals should focus more clearly on meaningful student-achievement outcomes.

On the other hand, one positive comment was consistently voiced relative to the evaluation process: the quality of peer evaluators. Most participants felt that peer feedback was genuinely and practically helpful.

There seemed to be unanimous agreement on two key points. First of all, participants felt strongly that there should be a single evaluation instrument for CL and non-CL teachers. Secondly, they felt that CL program participation should remain voluntary.

The CL coordinator, while acknowledged by some as a "good listener" and a "nice person," was again accused of bending the rules, such as tolerating late submission of paperwork. By doing so, he evidently sabotaged his own self-image; instead of being perceived as "nice" for doing so, participants questioned his sense of fairness and decision judgment in such cases.

"Poor communication" was an almost universally-voiced complaint with respect to organizational climate. There was overt hostility between the two groups of CL and non-CL teachers. One source of stress which once again came in for extended discussion was the problem of "unsubstantiated griping" and its harmful effects upon morale.

On the district-wide level, a special problem which almost all groups mentioned was that of low collective self-esteem. This chronically poor self-image was attributed primarily to the glut of negative reporting about this rural school system in the news media. Respondents recognized the need for equal attention to be given to the positive aspects of their students' and teachers' achievement. Along these lines, there was also an expressed desire for greater community (especially parental) involvement in the scholastic activities of the district.

Another unanimous conclusion from the second series of focus-group interviews was the tendency of CL elements to operate in isolation. A long-range planning process was seen as absolutely essential to the ultimate success of program implementation.

Conclusions and Recommendations

A number of observations can be made regarding the support and focus factors of the developmental-process model as a result of the two focus-group interview sessions. General comments emerging from both sets of interviews include the following:

1. The district must devote sufficient time and start-up resources to a carefully formulated long-range plan (of six to eight years' duration), in order to help insure the success of programs

such as CL. Objectives need to be set via consensus-style management in order to help ensure support from all groups involved in various phases of the implementation (administrators; central-office staff; teachers; community representatives; etc.). Time, patience and consensus-style operation would help prevent some of the problems (both those related to implementation and interpersonal difficulties) of the "crisis-style" management currently observed with regard to new-program adoption in this rural Arizona career ladder school district.

2. In formulating such objectives for program success, the goals to be set for teachers should be clearly focused on accountability for tangible and meaningful student outcomes. A jointly developed curriculum would help to clarify objectives to be met, as well as provide avenues for the input of diverse groups (such as those listed in # 1, above) relative to the long-range planning process. If possible, standards should be set for tracking social, emotional and behavioral outcomes, in addition to the more traditional academic indicators of student achievement.

3. CL participation should be kept voluntary. In addition, the current practice of placing many new applicants on Levels III and IV immediately needs to be re-evaluated, and discontinued if possible, due to the negative effects upon organizational climate (jealousy; insecurity; etc.). One idea which emerged in the interviews was a minimum amount of education (holding a master's degree) for acceptance, akin to licensing requirements for professions in the private sector (e.g., a minimum number of credits and/or degree requirements for candidacy as a certified public accountant). Perhaps similar "threshold" requirements could be developed for the higher CL placement levels, to discourage immediate placement at these levels for all practical purposes.

4. Program leaders need to explore ways to avoid removing CL teachers from their classrooms for frequent and extended periods of time in order to comply with program requirements and/or to attend special meetings, workshops, etc.

5. The number of committees needs to be streamlined. A more efficient information-dissemination process needs to be adopted with respect to announcements of meetings and the like, so that all potentially interested parties are informed well in advance of meeting dates and times.

6. A single evaluation instrument should be adopted for all teachers, both CL and non-CL. This would improve the perception of "fairness" by all teachers in the overall evaluation process, as well as reduce the paperwork burden (e.g., necessity to "keep two sets of books") on the part of already-overworked administrators.

7. The evaluation instrument should be streamlined, with the number of overt criteria reduced; e.g., collapsed into a fewer number of general factors.

8. Immediate and concentrated attention should be devoted to publicizing the positive aspects of this rural school system. This would counter the damaging effects upon collective self-esteem of recent media stories concerning the "below-average" performance of this school district's students, etc. Such positive counter-publicity might also have the desirable effect of increasing community awareness of, and involvement in, academic activities. It was pointed out in the parents' interview session that tremendous untapped resources already do exist in the district which could be used to enhance traditional classroom activities, and thus, learning. Development of a "high academic profile" in the local school district news media could effectively trigger greater community interest in such participation in activities related to the learning process.

9. Administrators currently have no incentive to devote their already-scarce time and efforts to programs such as CL. On the one hand, as pointed out in point # 6, above, they are required to do additional documentation on their CL teachers. However, they have no authority or say in the program requirements, such as the placement process. By providing "buy-ins" for administrators via explicit program designs and structures, these leaders will feel a greater sense of "ownership," thereby choosing to increase their involvement in program-related activities.

The focus-group format is a powerful tool for the validation of theoretical models, such as the support-and-focus-factor model, in actual program settings. By giving all groups affected by the program a chance to express their feelings, opinions and perceptions in open-ended format, one can determine the existence, importance and interrelationships of these factors as they actually operate in a specific context.

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